

Joseph Hooker, called "Fighting Joe," was the third in a succession of commanding Union generals President Lincoln appointed in his search for victories during the Civil War. When he gave Hooker command of the Army of the Potomac, Lincoln handed him this letter, which candidly discusses Hooker's strengths and weaknesses. Although Hooker failed to deliver the results Lincoln expected he was touched by the letter's tone. He told reporter Noah Brooks "That is just such a letter as a father might write to his son. It is a beautiful letter, and, although I think he was harder on me than I deserved, I will say that I love the man who wrote it."

Five months after he wrote this letter and just before the pivotal battle of Gettysburg, Lincoln replaced Hooker with George Meade. After Lincoln's assassination, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton placed Hooker in charge of some of the President's funerals, ending with a procession in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois.

Executive Mansion
Washington, January 26, 1863

Major General Hooker:
General.

I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and a skilful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country, and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship. The government will support you to the utmost of it's ability, which is neither more nor less than it has done and will do for all commanders. I much fear that the spirit which you have aided to infuse into the Army, of criticizing their Commander, and withholding confidence from him, will now turn upon you. I shall assist you as far as I can, to put it down. Neither you, nor Napoleon, if he were alive again, could get any good out of an army, while such a spirit prevails in it.

And now, beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories.

Yours very truly
A. Lincoln

Source: Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, edited by Roy P. Basler.

<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/hooker.htm>